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JOSEPH PAPP

AND

THE NEW YORK SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL (B)

A Case Study



In August, 1991 Joseph Papp, Founder and Producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival (NYSF), announced that JoAnne Akalaitis, Artistic Associate of the NYSF was succeeding him as the festival's Artistic Director. He would retain the title of Producer. "I am not Joe Papp in a skirt and I don't want to be," was how Akalaitis explained the transition.

If Joe had any doubts about me, I'd feel terrible, but because I am in power, it is a good feeling. . . . I think Joe really appreciates my work. He knows that I'm very well connected in the artistic community in New York and across the country. I am a communicative, outgoing person with a vision of what theater should be, and I have worked at the Public with or without Mabou Mines for 15 years. I'm also part of the community. My children went to school here, so this job is not a career move for me. It is a life commitment.¹

Meanwhile, the press reported that staff members at the NYSF found it hard to communicate with Akalaitis, "that she seemed abrupt rather than outgoing," characterizing her as "abrasive and more interested in political ideologies than theater or art."² In an earlier interview with the press Papp had observed that Akalaitis "has the capacity to rally a company around her because of her total dedication to her work" but acknowledged that she was having trouble fitting into the Festival's established structure, saying, "I think she was a little afraid of me. She hates being ruled by men, but we're getting to know each other and she's getting more involved."³ Papp promised not to censor Akalaitis in any way. "She is the artistic director now" he said. "I am the producer and can provide the overall view. It remains to be seen what will happen, but isn't it exciting?"⁴ Given what little the theater world knew of his illness⁵ there was speculation about his ability to carry out the role of producer.⁶

Akalaitis is "in an impossible position," said one reporter, "given the act she must follow" and the awful circumstances flowing from the NYSF's financial crisis. He argued that her success or

¹ Quoted in Witchel, A., 1991, Long a leader of the avant-garde, *The New York Times*, Aug. 21: C14

² Witchel, A., 1991, Long a leader of the avant-garde, *The New York Times*, Aug. 21: C14

³ Anon, 1991, Papp goes public with a stage revival, *Bergen Record*, Mar. 3

⁴ Quoted in Witchel, A., 1991, Papp names Akalaitis new head of festival, *The New York Times*, Aug. 21: C14

⁵ Papp had been diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1987. By 1991 it was clear that his illness was terminal.

⁶ Rich, Frank, 1991, The last of the one-man shows, *The New York Times*, Section 2, Sep. 22: 1-7



failure would have little to do with her talents as a director but would "ride on her ability, in a highly competitive environment, to attract the broad spectrum of artists and audiences required to make life happen" in the six theaters she controlled--five in the Public Theater complex and one in Central Park.⁷

At the end of September, Akalaitis organized a "town meeting" for playwrights at the Public Theater. Trying to reach out to playwrights as a "community," Akalaitis thought the meeting had gone better than expected though others who attended experienced it differently. She said that she planned to hire 10 to 20 readers to review unsolicited scripts and wanted to create a Playwrights Lab where established playwrights could help young playwrights.⁸ In October she initiated two series for playwrights to hear actors do staged readings of their new works and indicated that she wanted to have conferences on issues raised by some of the season's plays--prejudice, for instance. She was quoted as wanting "the theater to be a warm and welcome hangout."⁹

Joseph Papp died on October 31, 1991. The following day Lafayette Street in downtown Manhattan, site of the Public Theater, was closed to traffic. The crowd that had come to attend the funeral service at the theater overflowed down the steps and across the sidewalks, listening to the service on loudspeakers. Bernard Gersten, who had at one time been Papp's closest professional colleague as Associate Producer of the NYSF, told the mourners

Joe was not a long-term planner. Joe didn't really know that he was going to build a theater when he created the Shakespeare Theater Workshop in 1954. We know it now. . . . Joe was not a theoretician or a philosopher. Joe leapt into action driven by passion and rage and adrenaline and explained himself--if he felt like it--after the fact . . . ¹⁰

Later, a funeral cortege, led by a New York City Police Department squad car with sirens blaring and escorted by motorcycle police on each side, took the plain pine coffin to the Baron Hirsch

⁷ Rich, Frank, 1991, The last of the one-man shows, *The New York Times*, Section 2, Sep. 22: 1-7

⁸ Witchel, Alex, 1991, On stage, and off, *The New York Times*, October 4: C2

⁹ Wallach, Allan, 1991, At the Public, the play's no longer the only thing, *Newsday*, October 29: 46-48

¹⁰ Quoted in Epstein, Helen, 1994, *Joe Papp: An American life*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company: 4



cemetery in Staten Island. Papp was buried in the family plot besides his parents Shmuel and Yetta Papirofsky.¹¹

Newsweek observed that Akalaitis had "a frightening void to fill" memorializing Papp as the most dynamic embodiment of the idea of non-profit, subsidized theater, of theater that was not only art and entertainment but a vital part of American culture. an impresario, a politician, a giant ego, a giant force. . . . the life of the theater in a time when theater often seems to be fighting for its life. . . . Like Hamlet . . . a romantic idealist, like Lear . . . an imperial figure who insisted on his own way and more often than not was right.¹²

By the end of 1992 the NYSF's financial crisis had deepened. The Reserve Fund--created with income generated from "A Chorus Line"--had dropped to about \$15 million. The board put in place a three-year budget that cut administrative expenses by 40 percent and staff by 50 percent, from 120 to 60. However, they slightly increased the budget for productions on the principle that it was what the Festival put on the stage that drew "not only audiences but also corporate and donor interest."¹³

On March 15, 1993 the board of the NYSF, in response to an unanimous recommendation of its executive committee, formally voted to remove Akalaitis as Artistic Director of the Festival . A new management structure for the Festival was implemented. The dual leadership of Akalaitis and Producing Director, Jason Steven Cohen was replaced with leadership unified in a single producer. The new Producer was George C. Wolfe, and Cohen and Associate Artistic Director, Rosemarie Tichler, would both report to Wolfe. The board also announced that actor Kevin Kline would join the Festival as an artistic associate. The board told the press that the change was necessary "because the bifurcated leadership of the festival, after 37 years of the singular leadership of Joseph Papp, never took effective hold." Board members indicated, off the record, that their loss of confidence in Akalaitis was at least partially influenced by her artistic choices which did not create the excitement on the stage that would draw the audiences and donor interest that they felt were critical to restoring the Festival's fortunes. In fact, by the beginning of 1993 charitable donations to the Festival from all

¹¹ Epstein, Helen, 1994, *Joe Papp: An American life*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company: 4-8

¹² Kroll, Jack, 1991, *Newsweek*, November 11: 47

¹³ Weber, Bruce, 1993, New theater boss plans changes, *New York Times*, March 22



sources--private and business--were running behind projections.¹⁴ Press accounts of the transition pointed to Akalaitis' fondness for "grim, arcane projects that many felt alienated the audience built up by Papp," to her inability to keep the five theaters in the Public Theater complex busy and to her scorn for the fund-raising aspect of her responsibilities. Akalaitis, on her part, made it clear that she was not leaving voluntarily. "I want to say that I'm not resigning," she said. "I have been fired"¹⁵

The board had approached Wolfe with their offer in February. Wolfe, a young African-American director and author of *The Colored Museum*, had directed two successful productions--*Spunk* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*--at the Public Theater in 1990. Papp had, in early 1991, invited Wolfe to head one or two theaters within the building as a separate entity. Though eager to participate in the venture, Wolfe had been engaged at the time in developing *Jelly's Last Jam* in Los Angeles and had been forced to decline the invitation. Since completing that play Wolfe had gone on to direct *Angels in America* the first part of which was due to open on Broadway in April.

Wolfe's appointment was met with enthusiasm. He was compared favorably to Papp. A theater critic saw him as having "a flair for talent scouting, show business and self promotion [with] an artistic range whose broad sweep has more in common with Papp's inclusivity."¹⁶ "He is very bold, fearless I'd say, and he has a strong social agenda," said one person who knew him. Others described him as "personally warm and politically savvy." His administrative skills were, however, yet to be tested and many expected him to rely on professional managers.¹⁷

¹⁴ Weber, Bruce, 1993, Critics and defenders as Akalaitis leaves the Public Theater, *The New York Times*, March 16: C13

¹⁵ Quoted in Weber, Bruce, 1993, Sakespeare Festival dismisses Papp's heir, *New York Times*, March 12

¹⁶ Rich, Frank, 1993, Opening a window at a theater gone stale, *The New York Times*, Section 2, March 21

¹⁷ Collins, Glen, 1993, A much-sought director is praised after selection, *The New York Times*, March 12
